In first evacuation since ceasefire, Israel orders Gaza families to leave their homes

CAIRO: Israeli forces have ordered dozens of Palestinian families in the southern Gaza Strip to leave their homes in the first forced evacuation since October's ceasefire, as residents and Hamas said on Tuesday the military was expanding the area under its control.

Residents of Bani Suhaila, east of Khan Younis, said the leaflets were dropped on Monday on families living in tent encampments in the Al-Reqeb neighbourhood.

Urgent message. The area is under IDF control. You must evacuate immediately, said the leaflets, written in Arabic, Hebrew, and English, which the army dropped over the Al-Reqeb neighbourhood in the town of Bani Suhaila.

In the two-year war before the US brokered ceasefire was signed in October, Israel dropped leaflets over areas that were subsequently raided or bombarded, forcing some families to move several times.

Residents and a source from Hamas said this was the first time they had been dropped since then.

Sides far apart on next phases

The ceasefire has not progressed beyond its first phase, under which major fighting has stopped, Israel withdrew from less than half of Gaza, and Hamas released hostages in return for Palestinian detainees and prisoners.

Virtually the entire population of more than two million people are confined to around a third of Gaza's territory, mostly in makeshift tents and damaged buildings, where life has resumed under control of an administration led by Hamas.

Israel and Hamas have accused each other of major breaches of the ceasefire and remain far apart on the more difficult steps planned for the next phase. Mahmoud, a resident from the Bani Suhaila area, who asked not to give his family name, said the evacuation orders impacted at least 70 families, living in tents and homes, some of which were partially damaged, in the area.

"We have fled the area and relocated westward. It is maybe the fourth or fifth time the occupation expanded the yellow line since last month," he said from Khan Younis, referring to the line behind which Israel has withdrawn.

"Each time they move it around 120 to 150 metres (yards) inside the Palestinian-controlled territory, swallowing more land," the father-of-three said.

State of humanitarian disruption

Ismail Al-Thawabta, director of the Hamas-run Gaza government media office, said the Israeli military had expanded the area under its control in eastern Khan Younis five times since the ceasefire, forcing the displacement of at least 9,000 people.

On Monday, 19 January 2026, the Israeli occupation forces dropped warning leaflets demanding the forced evacuation of the Bani Suhaila area in eastern Khan Younis Governorate, in a measure that falls within a policy of intimidation and pressure on civilians, Thawabta said. He said the new evacuation orders affected approximately 3,000 people.

The move created a state of humanitarian disruption, increased pressure on the already limited shelter areas, and further deepened the internal displacement crisis in the governorate, Thawabta added.

Under future phases of the ceasefire that have yet to be hammered out, US President Donald Trump's plan envisages Hamas disarming, Israel pulling out further, and an internationally backed administration rebuilding Gaza.

More than 460 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers have been reported killed since the ceasefire took effect.—Reuters

Russell Brand in court on two rape charges

LONDON: Actor and comedian Russell Brand appeared before a UK court on Tuesday facing two new charges of rape and sexual assault.

The two new charges against Brand, 50, were brought in December 2025 and relate to two alleged incidents with separate women in London in 2009.

In May last year, he had already pleaded not guilty to two counts of rape, two counts of sexual assault and one count of indecent assault for alleged incidents involving four different women between 1999 and 2005.

Appearing remotely via video-link wearing a partially buttoned pale blue shirt, Brand, the ex-husband of popstar Katy Perry, only spoke to confirm his name and his date of birth.

He was granted conditional bail and is due to appear again in Southwark Crown Court in south London on February 17 for a pre-trial hearing.

He was originally charged following an investigation conducted by the *Sunday Times* newspaper and Channel 4 television in 2023, which included several allegations of a sexual nature against him.

A trial is set to begin at Southwark Crown Court in June on the five original charges.

Brand is a former stand-up comedian who gained Hollywood fame in the early 2010s. He married singer Perry in 2010, although the two divorced in 2012.

Once a left-leaning political campaigner and Hollywood star, he has rebranded himself as a conservative guru to his millions of social media followers. In 2024, he said he became a Christian after being baptised in the River Thames.—AFP

Farmers protest EU-Mercosur trade deal ahead of vote

STRASBOURG: Thousands of farmers driving tractors and waving flags descended on Tuesday on the European parliament in Strasbourg in protest at a major trade deal signed with South America, ahead of a vote on whether to refer it to the courts.

The deal inked earlier this month between the 27-nation European Union and Mercosur bloc members Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay creates one of the world's largest free trade areas after 25 years of tricky negotiations.

But the 4,500 farmers and their supporters from France, Italy, Belgium and Poland protesting on Tuesday, according to police estimates, fear it will cause an influx of cheaper goods produced with lower standards and banned pesticides. "This free trade may, in some cases, open up opportunities for Italy and reduce customs duties, but it endangers everyone's health," said Nicolo Koliotassis, 23, a winemaker and member of the Italian farmers' union Coldiretti.

Although final approval on the Mercosur treaty is not expected for several months, MEPs on Wednesday will vote on whether to refer the deal to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to determine if the agreement is compatible with EU policy. The court's ruling could then force the deal to be amended.

"We want MEPs to do their job, to appeal to the court so the agreement can be reviewed," Emmanuelle Poirier, 45, said. The French cattle breeder added she fears "mass imports of meat that do not meet France's specifications." Farmers plan to remain in Strasbourg until Wednesday.

They have no intention of "backing down," Herve Lapie, secretary-general of the FNSEA union behind the demonstration, said. The treaty, expected to come into force by the end of the year, eliminates tariffs on more than 90 percent of bilateral trade.

PROTESTERS stand among parked tractors and tear gas smoke outside the European Parliament building in Strasbourg, France.—AFP

The deal will favour European exports of cars, wine and cheese, while making it easier for South American beef, poultry, sugar, rice, honey and soybeans to enter Europe.

French farmer Baptiste Mary, 24, warned it would result in food imports "produced in a way completely different from Europe, with more crop protection products and different standards," while carrying a sign that read: "Mercosur = certain death".

According to EU estimates, European exports to Mercosur are expected to rise by 39 percent, while Mercosur exports to the EU could increase by 17 percent.

By 2040, the agreement is projected to boost EU GDP by 77.6 billion euros and Mercosur GDP by 9.4 billion euros.—AFP

WOMEN hold a rally in Ankara against an offensive by Syrian forces against Kurdish fighters.—AFP

Damascus gives Kurds four days to accept integration

SDF fighters 'compelled to withdraw' from IS-linked Al-Hol camp

DAMASCUS: Syria on Tuesday announced a ceasefire with Kurdish forces it has seized swathes of territory from in the northeast and gave them four days to agree on integrating into the central state, which their main ally, the United States, urged them to accept.

The lightning government advances in recent days and the apparent withdrawal of US support for the continued holding of territory by the Syrian Democratic Forces represent the biggest change of control in the country since rebels ousted Bashar al-Assad 13 months ago.

US envoy Tom Barrack in a social media post described the offer of integration into the central Syrian state with citizenship rights, cultural protections and political participation as the "greatest opportunity" the Kurds have.

He added that the original purpose of the SDF, which Washington had supported as its main local ally battling the militant Islamic State group, had largely expired, and that the US had no long-term interest in retaining its presence in Syria.

Ceasefire

The SDF said it accepted a ceasefire agreement with the Damascus government and that it would not engage in any military action unless attacked. A Syrian government statement said it had reached an understanding with the SDF for it to devise an integration plan for Hasakah province or risk state forces entering two SDF-controlled cities.

The government announced a four-day ceasefire starting on Tuesday evening and said it had asked the SDF to submit the name of a candidate to take the role of assistant to the defence minister in Damascus as part of the integration.

Northeast Syria, wedged between Turkiye and Iraq, is home to both Kurds and Arabs and was largely overrun by IS fighters a decade ago before the SDF drove them back with air support from a US-led coalition.

However, advances by the SDF's main component, the Kurdish YPG force, were concerning to US ally Turkiye, which regarded it as an offshoot of the PKK group that had waged a years-long insurgency inside Turkiye.

Since Assad was overthrown in December 2024, Syria has been led by former rebel leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, who at one stage controlled the Al Qaeda offshoot in the country, and who has emerged as a close ally of Turkiye.

Northeast Syria remains sensitive to Ankara, and is of wider international concern because of the presence of SDF-guarded facilities holding thousands of detained IS fighters and civilians associated with them.

IS detainees

About 200 low-level IS fighters escaped Shaddadi prison in northeast Syria on Monday when the SDF departed, but Syrian government forces recaptured many of them, a US official said on Tuesday.

The Syrian Interior Ministry said that about 120 IS detainees escaped, 81 of whom had been recaptured.

The SDF said it had also withdrawn from al-Hol camp housing thousands of civilians linked to the jihadist group near the Iraqi border. A senior Syrian government defence official said Damascus had notified the US of the SDF intention to withdraw from the vicinity of al-Hol camp and that government forces were ready to deploy there.

The SDF has previously said it was guarding some 10,000 IS fighters. Syrian military sources said government troops had advanced on Tuesday in eastern areas of Hasakah province and south of the town of Kobani on the border with Turkiye.—Reuters

Geomagnetic storm to bring northern lights to central US

WASHINGTON: Meteorologists say a major disturbance in Earth's magnetic field could mean the northern lights will be seen further south than typical in the US, possibly even in Alabama or northern California.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) warned the severe geomagnetic storm could also cause tech problems, including issues with voltage control and impacts on satellite operations.

NOAA officials said those in northern and central states of the continental US "can look for the aurora if at night and should weather conditions permit." "Auroras may become visible over much of the northern half of the country and maybe as far south as Alabama to northern California." The storm is a result of "an eruption of solar material and magnetic fields" that left the sun Sunday and is expected to arrive Monday and Tuesday. The severity of this geomagnetic storm is "very rare," NOAA said.

Shawn Dahl of NOAA's Space Weather Prediction Center said the last time a solar radiation storm of this intensity showered the earth was in 2003.—AFP

Valentino taught us to respect women, says partner

ROME: Italian designer Valentino Garavani loved creating outfits that made women beautiful, his partner Giancarlo Giammetti said on Tuesday, following the style legend's death aged 93. "He always said, 'It's not my fault, I just like beauty,'" Giammetti told journalists outside the Valentino headquarters in Rome.

The designer, who launched his fashion house in 1960, dressed some of the world's most famous women, from Elizabeth Taylor and Nancy Reagan through to Sharon Stone and Julia Roberts.He was responsible for many iconic red carpet outfits, and was perhaps best known for his gowns in a vivid "Valentino red".

His legacy was that "fashion serves to embellish and not to ridicule", said Giammetti, whose business acumen helped elevate the label to global prominence. Valentino believed "clothes should be recognised for what they give to women, not for what the design wants to convey", he said. —AFP

New framework to 'end enforced disappearances from Feb 1'

Continued from Page 1

approved the Balochistan Witness Protection (Amendment) Bill, 2025. Mr Bugti said that in the past, the absence of an effective witness protection mechanism had led to extremely low conviction rates in terrorism and serious criminal cases. Under the new reforms, witnesses will testify through faceless courts, with their identities kept fully confidential, a measure expected to significantly improve convictions.

The cabinet expressed satisfaction over merit-based recruitments conducted through online testing in the Finance Department and decided to gradually digitalise recruitment processes across all provincial departments.

Among other decisions, the cabinet approved the abolition of the Religious Affairs Department, with staff to be adjusted in other departments, the creation of two new divisions (Pishin and Koh-i-Suleman), administrative realignment of Ziarat with Loralai, and the establishment of Municipal Committee Karbala in Pishin district.

The cabinet also approved policies related to the evaluation of law officers, amendments to grant-in-aid rules for minority affairs, measures to curb child labour, the declaration of higher technical education as an essential service and verification of academic credentials of contract teachers.

The chief minister directed the Chief Minister's Inspection Team to initiate verification of degrees, warning that FIRs would be registered against holders of fake credentials, starting from Nasirabad and Dera Bugti.

Education-related decisions included adopting the national curriculum as part of the provincial syllabus from the academic year 2026-27, launching the Chief Minister Academic Excellence Programme and hiring ad-hoc teachers for mathematics, science and English at middle, high and higher secondary levels.

In the social sector, the cabinet approved the Balochistan Protection and Promotion of Reproductive Health Rights Bill, 2026, aimed at improving maternal and child health, expanding access to family planning services and safeguarding basic reproductive health rights.

Rescuers risk life and limb as Gul Plaza smoulders

Continued from Page 1

provinces that were not devolved further.

MQM-P leader Dr Farooq Sattar blamed the PPP government in Sindh for poor civic conditions, saying the local administration failed to handle the inferno effectively. "The PPP has been ruling Sindh for 18 years and has done nothing to improve civic conditions," he said, while calling for the creation of more administrative units for better governance and strengthening local government systems.

On the other hand, PPP leader Shehla Raza clarified, "There is an impression being created that there is no local government system in Sindh. [But] Sindh is the only province where local government systems are working."

She also objected to the claims made by MQM-P's Sattar, stating that "it is not necessary for ministers to show up when such an incident happens". She admitted that there had been a delay due to traffic congestion in the area.

'Coordinated action'

Across party lines, lawmakers stressed that coordinated action by federal and provincial governments was essential to ensure such tragedies were not repeated, and that public safety must be strengthened through enforceable laws and effective urban governance.

"If we want to empower the people in a true sense, we will have to bring in the local government system," PML-N leader Khwaja Asif said. He stressed that, due to the 18th Amendment, all administrative powers had been assigned to the provincial governments.

"If local government systems are not strengthened, then the defence ministry, the navy and aviation will be doing your work for you," the defence minister said, as the House was informed that water bowsers of the Pakistan Navy had also taken part in the operation.

Meanwhile, Karachi Mayor Murtaza Wahab said the Sindh Building Control Authority had started action against "non-compliant buildings" under the Fire Safety Regulations. In a tweet, he said a letter containing a list of such buildings had been sent to the Association of Builders and Developers (ABAD), requesting it to direct its members to comply with fire safety measures within three days.

Separately, Sindh Governor Kamran Tessori met traders to discuss the tragedy's impact on businesses housed in Gul Plaza. "We must learn lessons from this incident. If such a murderous plaza stands or is about to be built, we must prevent it," he asserted. The governor noted that legislation stopping such buildings from being constructed existed but lacked implementation.

SBCA rejects 'baseless reports'

Rejecting what it called "baseless reports" in the media, the Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA) said the impression being given that records of Gul Plaza were not available with the authority was incorrect.

It said Gul Plaza was originally constructed in the 1970s, and a revised no-objection certificate (NOC) for sale and advertisement was issued in 2005, under which approval was granted for at least 1,102 shops.

According to the approved building plan, the building had two staircases from the basement to the ground floor, six staircases from the ground floor to the first floor, five staircases from the second floor to the third floor, and 16 exit routes on the ground floor for evacuation purposes.

PML-N senator sees officials' hand in Nadra, FBR data leak

Continued from Page 1

data. "Who will be responsible if their data is leaked?" he said.

Proposal to ban social media platforms

Minister of State for Interior Talal Chaudhry also attended the meeting, and raised the issue of the use of social media by terrorists.

"Previously, terrorists used guns. Now, they are using social media," he said, adding that social media companies would not even share the internet protocol addresses of users operating accounts being used for terrorism.

Speaking on the matter, Senator Rahman suggested that the government should enter into a contract with social media platforms. He further advised that platforms that did not cooperate with the government should be banned.

PPP Senator Palwasha Khan endorsed these views, saying: "A ban should definitely be imposed."

Senator Rahman further pointed out that China had its own social media platforms and said, "There is no need to employ the services of those [companies] that are not cooperating."

Chaudhry responded to the suggestion, saying: "This is a big decision, you can take it. If we take it, it will be called an attack on the freedom of expression."